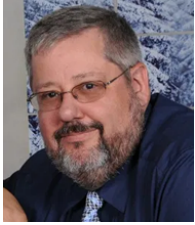


# Federalist and Antifederalist #1



By Paul Engel

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- After the Constitution was signed and sent to the states, a great debate between those who supported ratification, and those who were concerned.
- Writings for the two groups became known as the Federalist and Antifederalist Papers.
- This article focuses on papers #1, should the Constitution be ratified.

I don't believe a serious study of the Constitution can be made without looking at the public debates over the document. After the Constitutional Convention sent the proposed constitution to the states for ratification, a great debate was had over its pros and cons. Supporters of the document as proposed, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, published essays in New York State newspapers under the pseudonym Publius. These essays are collectively known as the Federalist Papers. Meanwhile, several authors published articles and essays opposing, or at least cautioning a rush to adopt the proposed Constitution, under many pseudonyms.

In this article, we'll look at the first papers from each group. Both Federalist #1 and Antifederalist #1 deal with the same topic: Should the states ratify the newly proposed Constitution?

**Clash of Ideals**

While the Federalists and Antifederalists are often claimed to be for and against the Constitution, respectively, a closer look at their writings seems to show that the Antifederalists were no less patriotic than the federalist. Rather, having recently fought a war against a powerful central government, they were not ready to rush into another one. A better description of the differences would seem to be that the federalists wanted a strong central government to protect the union while the antifederalists wanted to insure the rights of the individuals were protected.

Let's start with Federalist #1 and the argument for adopting the proposed Constitution.

### **Federalist #1**

The first of the Federalist Papers was written by Alexander Hamilton and published in the Independent Journal under the pseudonym Publius.

AFTER an unequivocal experience of the inefficiency of the subsisting federal government, you are called upon to deliberate on a new Constitution for the United States of America.

Alexander Hamilton – [Federalist #1](#)

While our current federal government was created by the Constitution of the United States, it was not the first federal government for the United States of America. The government created by the [Articles of Confederation](#) had many issues, but mainly, it had responsibility without the power to fulfill them. Probably the most well known was the fact that the federal government under the Articles of Confederation could levy taxes against the states, but had no mechanism to force them to pay. So when Article VIII of the Articles states:

Article VIII. All charges of war, and all other expenses that

shall be incurred for the common defence or general welfare, and allowed by the united states in congress assembled, shall be defrayed out of a common treasury, which shall be supplied by the several states, in proportion to the value of all land within each state

### [Articles of Confederation](#)

There was no mechanism to make sure the states supplied their part of the expenses.

While many Antifederalist claimed the Federalists wished to establish an aristocracy, that is not what the Federalists stated.

It has been frequently remarked that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.

Alexander Hamilton – [Federalist #1](#)

Could the people establish good government on their own? Or did government need to be forced upon them?

If there be any truth in the remark, the crisis at which we are arrived may with propriety be regarded as the era in which that decision is to be made; and a wrong election of the part we shall act may, in this view, deserve to be considered as the general misfortune of mankind.

Alexander Hamilton – [Federalist #1](#)

The decision of what kind of government would be set up for this young republic would be up to the people, as they would genuinely suffer the consequences.

Happy will it be if our choice should be directed by a judicious estimate of our true interests, unperplexed and unbiased by considerations not connected with the public good.

Alexander Hamilton – [Federalist #1](#)

The Federalists claim to desire a fair consideration of their position: Their support of the drafted Constitution. What do they see as their obstacles?

Among the most formidable of the obstacles which the new Constitution will have to encounter may readily be distinguished the obvious interest of a certain class of men in every State to resist all changes which may hazard a diminution of the power, emolument, and consequence of the offices they hold under the State establishments; and the perverted ambition of another class of men, who will either hope to aggrandize themselves by the confusions of their country, or will flatter themselves with fairer prospects of elevation from the subdivision of the empire into several partial confederacies than from its union under one government.

Alexander Hamilton – [Federalist #1](#)

It seems power and ambition are nothing new in this country. There are some who resist all change, whether for good or for ill. There are others whose ambition would drive them to place their own prospects over those of their country.

And a further reason for caution, in this respect, might be drawn from the reflection that we are not always sure that those who advocate the truth are influenced by purer principles than their antagonists. Ambition, avarice, personal animosity, party opposition, and many other motives not more laudable than these, are apt to operate as well upon those who support as those who oppose the right side of a question.

Alexander Hamilton – [Federalist #1](#)

Both sides claimed they were guided by purer principles than their opponents. Except for the older language, this could just as easily be a campaign flyer from our recent elections. Whose principles are purer? Could both be pure, yet still disagree?

And yet, however just these sentiments will be allowed to be, we have already sufficient indications that it will happen in this as in all former cases of great national discussion. A torrent of angry and malignant passions will be let loose. To judge from the conduct of the opposite parties, we shall be led to conclude that they will mutually hope to evince the justness of their opinions, and to increase the number of their converts by the loudness of their declamations and the bitterness of their invectives.

Alexander Hamilton – [Federalist #1](#)

Needless to say, there were many accusations and name calling, from both sides, although, as we'll see when we review Antifederalist #1, Mr. Hamilton has a point. That's not to say he wasn't willing to throw a few verbal jabs at his opponents.

An enlightened zeal for the energy and efficiency of government will be stigmatized as the offspring of a temper fond of despotic power and hostile to the principles of liberty. An over-scrupulous jealousy of danger to the rights of the people, which is more commonly the fault of the head than of the heart, will be represented as mere pretense and artifice, the stale bait for popularity at the expense of the public good.

Alexander Hamilton – [Federalist #1](#)

Yes, the Antifederalists stigmatized what Mr. Hamilton refers to as “the energy and efficiency of government.” Then again, a look at Washington, D.C. today shows that the Antifederalist's concerns over such a powerful government should have been better heeded.

On the other hand, it will be equally forgotten that the vigor of government is essential to the security of liberty; that, in the contemplation of a sound and well-informed judgment, their interest can never be separated; and that a dangerous ambition more often lurks behind the specious mask of zeal for the rights of the people than under the forbidden appearance of zeal for the firmness and efficiency of government. History will teach us that the former has been found a much more certain road to the introduction of despotism than the latter, and that of those men who have overturned the liberties of republics, the greatest number have begun their career by paying an obsequious court to the people; commencing demagogues, and ending tyrants.

Alexander Hamilton – [Federalist #1](#)

Mr. Hamilton makes a valid point. Without a vigorous government to protect the rights of the people, despotism had frequently found a way to power at the expense of those rights.

In the course of the preceding observations, I have had an eye, my fellow-citizens, to putting you upon your guard against all attempts, from whatever quarter, to influence your decision in a matter of the utmost moment to your welfare, by any impressions other than those which may result from the evidence of truth. You will, no doubt, at the same time, have collected from the general scope of them, that they proceed from a source not unfriendly to the new Constitution.

Alexander Hamilton – [Federalist #1](#)

Ultimately, the decision about our nation's future was placed in the hands of her people. Our responsibility, to insure that governments at all levels remain servants of the people rather than their masters, has never lessened. However, history has shown that We the People have become more interested in being ruled than governed.

Yes, my countrymen, I own to you that, after having given it an attentive consideration, I am clearly of opinion it is your interest to adopt it. I am convinced that this is the safest course for your liberty, your dignity, and your happiness.

Alexander Hamilton – [Federalist #1](#)

Being a federalist, and one willing to spend the time and effort to write most of the Federalist Papers, it should be no surprise that Alexander Hamilton believes that the safest course for the people is to adopt the Constitution as drafted. That, however, is not to say he was unaware of efforts to thwart its adoption.

But the fact is, that we already hear it whispered in the private circles of those who oppose the new Constitution, that the thirteen States are of too great extent for any general system, and that we must of necessity resort to separate confederacies of distinct portions of the whole.

Alexander Hamilton – [Federalist #1](#)

Should the thirteen states join together, or would that nation be too large and unwieldy? Would the people be better served by a number of smaller confederacies?

For nothing can be more evident, to those who are able to take an enlarged view of the subject, than the alternative of an adoption of the new Constitution or a dismemberment of the Union. It will therefore be of use to begin by examining the advantages of that Union, the certain evils, and the probable dangers, to which every State will be exposed from its dissolution. This shall accordingly constitute the subject of my next address.

Alexander Hamilton – [Federalist #1](#)

Now that there are 50 states in our union, what can we observe? Before I answer that question, let us consider the

other side of the argument.

## **Antifederalist #1**

The first of the Antifederalist Papers was published on November 26, 1787 in The Boston Gazette and Country Journal. In a somewhat ironic twist, that author of this essay, John DeWitt, used the pseudonym A Federalist.

I am pleased to see a spirit of inquiry burst the band of constraint upon the subject of the NEW PLAN for consolidating the governments of the United States, as recommended by the late Convention. If it is suitable to the GENIUS and HABITS of the citizens of these states, it will bear the strictest scrutiny.

A Federalist – [Antifederalist](#) No. 1

Mr. DeWitt made the point that, if the proposed Constitution was worthy of support, it should be able to bear up under strict scrutiny.

The PEOPLE are the grand inquest who have a RIGHT to judge of its merits.

A Federalist – [Antifederalist](#) No. 1

Both Mr.s Hamilton and DeWitt agreed that the people have the right to be the ultimate judge of whether the proposed Constitution should be ratified.

The hideous daemon of Aristocracy has hitherto had so much influence as to bar the channels of investigation, preclude the people from inquiry and extinguish every spark of liberal information of its qualities.

A Federalist – [Antifederalist](#) No. 1

As I've already pointed out, the Antifederalists were concerned that the United States could become a land of



aristocracy at the expense of the liberty of the American people. Their concerns, about those in power using censorship to deprive everyday Americans of the information they needed to make good decisions, is nothing new in this land.

Those furious zealots who are for cramming it down the throats of the people, without allowing them either time or opportunity to scan or weigh it in the balance of their understandings, bear the same marks in their features as those who have been long wishing to erect an aristocracy in THIS COMMONWEALTH [of Massachusetts]. Their menacing cry is for a RIGID government, it matters little to them of what kind, provided it answers THAT description. As the plan now offered comes something near their wishes, and is the most consonant to their views of any they can hope for, they come boldly forward and DEMAND its adoption. They brand with infamy every man who is not as determined and zealous in its favor as themselves. They cry aloud the whole must be swallowed or none at all, thinking thereby to preclude any amendment; they are afraid of having it abated of its present RIGID aspect.

A Federalist – [Antifederalist](#) No. 1

In addition to their concerns about a rigid government about to deprive the people of their rights and liberties, the Antifederalists saw the Federalist as attempting to rush the adoption of the Constitution before the people had a chance to properly read and digest it. That is rather like politicians today who tell us “we have to pass the bill so that you can find out what is in it.”

They have strived to overawe or seduce printers to stifle and obstruct a free discussion, and have endeavored to hasten it to a decision before the people can duly reflect upon its properties. In order to deceive them, they incessantly declare that none can discover any defect in the system but bankrupts who wish no government, and officers of the present government who fear to lose a part of their power. These zealous

partisans may injure their own cause, and endanger the public tranquility by impeding a proper inquiry; the people may suspect the WHOLE to be a dangerous plan, from such COVERED and DESIGNING schemes to enforce it upon them.

A Federalist – [Antifederalist](#) No. 1

It seems partisan name calling, and most likely hyperbole, are nothing new in American politics. Were the Federalists attempting to censor “misinformation,” much like the federal government does today? Or were the Antifederalists using these claims to derail their political opponents? One thing is for sure, while the Federalists wanted a stronger federal government, the Antifederalists wanted stronger states.

I had rather be a free citizen of the small republic of Massachusetts, than an oppressed subject of the great American empire.

A Federalist – [Antifederalist](#) No. 1

While the claim that the Antifederalists were against ratification of the proposed Constitution is quite common, that is not entirely true.

If we can confederate upon terms that will secure to us our liberties, it is an object highly desirable, because of its additional security to the whole. If the proposed plan proves such an one, I hope it will be adopted, but if it will endanger our liberties as it stands, let it be amended; in order to which it must and ought to be open to inspection and free inquiry.

A Federalist – [Antifederalist](#) No. 1

Would the proposed Constitution secure the people’s liberties or endanger them? That’s the central contention between the two groups. However, it appears Mr. DeWitt’s greatest concern is the speed with which the proposed Constitution was being

ratified.

It will first be allowed that many undesigning citizens may wish its adoption from the best motives, but these are modest and silent, when compared to the greater number, who endeavor to suppress all attempts for investigation.

A Federalist – [Antifederalist](#) No. 1

Mr. DeWitt does not imply that everyone who supports the proposed Constitution did so with evil intent, but that the vast majority seemed to want to suppress any attempts to investigate the details of the document. It may surprise you that Mr. DeWitt lays the blame for this apparent rush to judgment on many of the same people Americans vilify today.

These violent partisans are for having the people gulp down the gilded pill blindfolded, whole, and without any qualification whatever. These consist generally, of the NOBLE order of C[incinnatu]s, holders of public securities, men of great wealth and expectations of public office, B[an]k[er]s and L[aw]y[er]s: these with their train of dependents form the Aristocrattick combination. The Lawyers in particular, keep up an incessant declamation for its adoption; like greedy gudgeons they long to satiate their voracious stomachs with the golden bait. The numerous tribunals to be erected by the new plan of consolidated empire, will find employment for ten times their present numbers; these are the LOAVES AND FISHES for which they hunger.

A Federalist – [Antifederalist](#) No. 1

It seems well over 200 years later little has changed when it comes to class warfare; the “haves” versus the “have nots” is as old as time. As is the vilification of lawyers and their relationships with those who make the laws they claim to serve.

The time draws near for the choice of Delegates. I hope my

fellow-citizens will look well to the characters of their preference, and remember the Old Patriots of 75; they have never led them astray, nor need they fear to try them on this momentous occasion.

A Federalist – [Antifederalist](#) No. 1

As Massachusetts was preparing to choose delegates for their ratification convention, Mr. DeWitt urged his fellow citizens to seriously consider the character of those whom they would choose. Something we in the 21st century should consider each and every time we vote.

## **Conclusion**

Is anyone else amazed at how similar the political discourse of today mirrors that of 1787? Censorship, class warfare, and necessity all trotted out in the name of protecting the American people. With 237 years of experience, which of these two camps were right? The best answer I can give is: Both.

Granted, no one can prove what would have happened if the ratification debates had gone differently. I do think history has shown that a strong central government has been as helpful in foreign affairs as it has been detrimental in domestic. Slavery, Racial Discrimination, Fascism, and Communism may not have been defeated if not for the might of a powerful central government. Then again, it has been that same strong central government that has helped keep racism and communism as an integral part of American life. As the Federalists warned, the Bill of Rights demanded by the Antifederalists has been used to regulate and abuse the very rights it was supposed to protect.

As we look back through history, I hope you will agree there is a lot to learn from both sides. For example, the struggle between a ruling elite and a free and independent people, centralized vs distributed power, and the character of the men and women chosen for office are important, but let's not

forget that the very same power of government that can protect our rights can also infringe on them. Now, more than ever, I think the American people need to remember the words of James A. Garfield

[N]ow more than ever before, the people are responsible for the character of their Congress. If that body be ignorant, reckless and corrupt, it is because the people tolerate ignorance, recklessness and corruption. If it be intelligent, brave and pure, it is because the people demand these high qualities to represent them in the national legislature.

### [A Century of Congress](#)

I hope to do more comparisons between these two sets of essays. While they do not align exactly, they often cover similar topics. As Santayana warned, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

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E-Mail Paul Engel: [paul@constitutionstudy.com](mailto:paul@constitutionstudy.com)